

Variations on America – Charles Ives
Theme and Variations
3-part Plan

National Music Standards (rev. 2014)

Artistic Process: Creating
Anchor Standard: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work
Process Component: Plan and Make
Enduring Understanding: Musicians' creative choices are influenced by their expertise, context, and expressive intent.

Essential Question: How do musicians make creative decisions?

MU:CR2.1.4

- a. Demonstrate selected and organized musical ideas for an improvisation, arrangement, or composition to express intent, and explain connection to purpose and context.

Learning Target

The student will contribute to the creation of a variation on a theme.

Materials

Haystacks (Monet series) – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haystacks_\(Monet_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haystacks_(Monet_series))

Organ performance

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=ives+variations+on+america&view=detail&mid=C46EA9AF596EBD8855AFC46EA9AF596EBD8855AF&FORM=VIRE>

Optional, Visual of the terms THEME / VARIATIONS

San Francisco Symphony Interactive Site – *Keeping Score*

<http://www.keepingcore.org/interactive/pages/ives/exp-singing>

Notation/lyrics for *America (My Country 'Tis of Thee)*

Optional, piano accompaniment for *America* (F major)

<https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/147490>

One white board, marker and eraser per small group

Variations Chart*

Small Group Create Guidelines and Rubric* (one rubric per group)

Pencils, clipboards, rubric sheet (one per group)

**denotes document included with symphony plans*

Part One: Show understanding of the concept of *theme and variations*.

Warmup:

Active listening

“We are going to listen to music that will be performed by the Des Moines Symphony at our concert. Find a comfortable place to listen. Close your eyes, relax, breathe slowly. Pay attention to any colors the music might make you see or any feelings or words that the music makes you feel or think about.”

Listen to 2-3 minutes of the music.

Ask for volunteers to share their thoughts.

Direct Instruction:

Show students the *Haystacks* series of painting from Wikipedia (*scroll down to find many versions of the painting*).

“**What is the THEME of these paintings?** (How are they all the same?) What are the VARIATIONS? (How is each different from the others?)” (use theme and variations visuals)

“**In music, we also have *theme and variations*.** Charles Ives is an American composer who wrote variations for the song, *America*. Ives was 17 years old when he composed this music for organ in 1891. He played it at the church where he was the organist since he was 14 years old. He said about this piece that ‘playing it was almost more fun than baseball!’ He was also captain of his baseball team.”

If students have not learned to sing *America*, have them learn it now. If they already know it, have them sing it (F major). They may sing unaccompanied, use the piano accompaniment included with these materials or sing with the online accompaniment at:

<http://www.keepingcore.org/interactive/pages/ives/exp-singing>

Guided practice:

The following video is recommended for student listening/viewing (organ performance):

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=ives+variations+on+america&view=detail&mid=C46EA9AF596EBD8855AFC46EA9AF596EBD8855AF&FORM=VIRE>

Listen to/watch Variation 1 *Moderato* (begins at 1’ 55”)

Descriptors: fast notes, ornamentation, decoration, legato/staccato, high notes

Have volunteers describe how the music is different from the theme. Teachers records on chart.

Independent Practice:

In small groups (4-5 students), discuss how each variation sounds different from the theme.

Each group assigns **a recorder and a reporter**, rotating jobs to different people for each variation.

Recorder writes three descriptive words the group members think of on the white board and the **reporter** relays those words to the teacher during whole-group sharing.

- Variation 2 *Andante* (begins at 2’ 41”)

Possible descriptors: slow, legato, dissonance, moving notes

- Variation 3 *Allegro* (begins at 3’ 46”)

Descriptors: 6/8 meter, dance-like, fast notes

- Variation 4 *Polonaise* (begins at 4’ 42”)

Descriptors: forte, repeated pattern, minor sound, fast

- Variation 5 *Moderato* (begins at 5’ 42”)

Descriptors: slow, notes always moving in lower part

Assessment:

When all the variations have been heard and described, **discuss** the ways Ives used to make the music different from the theme (ideas are at the bottom of the Variations Chart).

“**In your groups, name** three ways you could create a variation to

America.” After three minutes, have each group share their ideas.

Part Two: Work cooperatively to create a variation on *America*.

Warmup:

Teach students movement to the music using **Variations on *America* – Movement Directions***

Review:

Review the concept of *theme and variations*.

If you have time...

- read *What Charlie Heard* by Mordecai Gerstein
- OR
- Explore the San Francisco Symphony’s *Keeping Score* site with interactive possibilities for Ives’ music

“Charles Ives grew up with a father who loved to experiment with sound. George Ives encouraged his son to try new and different things with music. One way composers experiment with music is in the form of theme and variations. We have listened to Ives’ composition titled *Variations on “America”*. Can we list all the musical ways he changed the music for his variations?”

If students need a reminder, ideas are at the bottom of the **Variations Chart**.

Guided Instruction:

Create a class variation of *America*.

- 1) **Review the theme by singing** it (piano accompaniment or online accompaniment or a *cappella*).
- 2) Students **suggest one way to change the song** so that it becomes a variation.
Possibilities include: tempo, articulation (legato/staccato), dynamics, add instrumental accompaniment
- 3) **Practice and then perform** the class-created variation.

Independent Practice:

Create a variation on *America* in small groups.

Working in groups of 5-6, students will:

- 1) Share ideas
- 2) Work cooperatively
- 3) Choose materials/instruments thoughtfully
- 4) Practice with purpose

The teacher will establish Small Group Create Guidelines and Rubric (see document) and:

- Set out materials/instruments
- Set a time limit for creating and practice
- Record each group’s practice on an iPad or smart phone for future reference

Part Three: Perform the student-created variations.

Warmup:

Perform movement with the music (*see Variations on *America* – Movement Directions*)

Review:

Small Group Create Guidelines and Rubric*

Set a time limit for practice of the student-created variations in small groups. (suggested 5 minutes).

As students gather materials for practice, the teacher shows them the practice video recorded at the previous music class. Groups practice their variation.

Assessment:

Students perform their variation after singing the theme. (This can be done twice so that any errors can be fixed and so students can tweak their variation.)

Immediately after the performances, students should be given the opportunity to **discuss** which musical ways each group used in their variation.

Distribute a **rubric sheet**, pencil and clipboard to each group. The members of each group should give itself a score using the rubric from the document titled “Small Group Create Guidelines and Rubric.”

Resources

Keeping Score

San Francisco Symphony

<http://www.keepingcore.org/interactive/pages/ives/exp-playing>

Lesson plan – theme and variations

https://d15gc4eof6ew0j.cloudfront.net/res/DSO%20Kids%20Lesson%20Resources/Destination%20America_musical%20arrangement_26-27.pdf

Theme and Variations lesson plan

<https://www.musick8.com/html/ideadisplay.php?ibid=1944>

Gerstein, Mordicai. *What Charlie Heard*.